

Acute Bronchitis

Most bouts of acute bronchitis are caused by viral infections, and usually soon go. This leaflet gives some tips on what to do, and what symptoms to look out for which may indicate a more serious illness.

What is acute bronchitis and what are the symptoms?

Acute bronchitis is an infection of the the bronchi - the large airways. (Chronic bronchitis is a separate illness and is not dealt with here. See separate leaflet called '*Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease - COPD*' for information on chronic bronchitis.) Acute bronchitis is common and is usually due to a viral infection. A bacterial infection is a less common cause.

The main symptom is cough. You may also develop fever, headache, cold symptoms, and aches and pains. Symptoms typically peak after 2-3 days and then gradually clear. However, it commonly takes 2-3 weeks for the cough to go completely after the other symptoms have gone. This is because inflammation in the airways caused by the infection may take some time to settle.

What is the treatment for acute bronchitis?

- **Take paracetamol, ibuprofen, or aspirin** to reduce fever (high temperature), and to ease any aches, pains and headaches. (Children under 16 should not take aspirin.)
- **Have lots to drink** if you have a fever to prevent mild dehydration.
- **There is no 'quick fix' for the cough.** You need to be patient until it goes. Cough medicines that you can buy may help, but there is little scientific evidence that they ease a cough. They often contain several ingredients. For example, some contain decongestants, which may relieve a bunged-up nose. Some contain paracetamol, so be careful that you do not take these in addition to paracetamol tablets. Some ingredients can make you drowsy, which may help you to sleep. Ask a pharmacist for advice.
- **Antibiotics are not usually advised** if you are normally in good health. Your immune system can usually clear the infection. Antibiotics do not kill viruses. Even if a bacterium is the cause, antibiotics usually do little to speed up recovery of bronchitis. Antibiotics may even make symptoms worse as some people develop side-effects such as diarrhoea, feeling sick and rashes. Antibiotics may be prescribed if you become more unwell, or if you already have an ongoing (chronic) lung disease. They may also be prescribed if a complication develops such as pneumonia - but this is unlikely to occur if you are otherwise healthy.
- **If you smoke**, you should try to stop for good. Bronchitis, chest infections and serious lung diseases are more common in smokers.

What symptoms should I look out for?

Acute bronchitis usually clears without complications. Occasionally, the infection travels to the lung tissue to cause pneumonia. Consult a doctor if any of the following occur.

- If fever, wheezing or headaches become worse or severe.
- If you develop: fast breathing, shortness of breath, chest pains, or if you cough up blood.
- If you become drowsy or confused.
- If a cough persists longer than 3-4 weeks.
- If you have recurring bouts of acute bronchitis.
- If any other symptom develops that you are concerned about.